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HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARCHIVES

Paper: Houston Chronicle**Date:** THU 03/13/2003**Section:** ThisWeek**Page:** 1**Edition:** 2 STAR**Silent whistle / Cities gear up to muffle noise from train toots**

By DEBORAH MANN LAKE, Houston Chronicle correspondent

Residents and city officials from West University Place, Bellaire and Houston have decided to join together to form a task force to muffle what they believe is noise pollution from the horns of passing trains.

West University residents Kristin Palmer and Brian Antweil led proponents of banning train whistles in a meeting with representatives from Union Pacific railroad, the Federal Railroad Administration and the Texas Department of Transportation.

The three cities were represented by West University Councilwoman Marilyn Griffin and City Manager Michael Ross as well as Palmer and Antweil; Bellaire City Manager Bernard Satterwhite; and from Houston, Rick Dickson, community liaison in the mayor's office, and Afton Oaks resident Constance Holderer.

"We certainly want to look into the issue and see if there is anything we can do to mitigate the problem," Satterwhite said. "It seems we've explored every measure available and somehow there's got to be some coordination to figure out what can be done. I'm anxious to get back together with other members of the task force."

The most probable measure would be establishing "quiet zones" along the Union Pacific track in question, which runs north-south from north of Memorial Park to South Main before turning west.

A Union Pacific representative said the track is a major line to California. It is in the city limits of Houston, runs between West U. and Bellaire along one segment, and is on land owned by Union Pacific.

Quiet zones are areas where additional safety measures have been taken in order for trains to be allowed to not sound their horns. Proposed measures include raised medians and full-length crossing arms to prevent cars from trying to beat trains at crossings.

But there is a moratorium on quiet zones until federal regulations for them are finalized later this year.

"I believe that the final ruling will be highly responsive to concerns people have had," said Warren Flatau, a spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration in Washington, D.C. "We acknowledge that train horns have a detectable quality-of-life impact on communities. The regulations will absolutely spell out conditions for establishing quiet zones."

In the meantime, all tracks lead to the city of Houston, say several attendees of the meeting.

"One of the biggest challenges will be working through the city of Houston. It was a very positive meeting and I think if all the parties are motivated to do something, it's doable," Ross said.

Dickson said Houston is interested in quiet zones, but funding would be a question mark. Additional safety measures could cost \$80,000 to \$120,000 per crossing.

"We strive for peaceful co-existence. If there's something we can do to enhance quality of life, count us in, especially if it's a non-cost thing," said Dickson, who will be sending a memo on the meeting to the Houston City Council Committee on Transportation.

In fact, participants at the meeting were told that they may find funding help through the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

Flatau said the railroad administration encourages cities and other entities to join together to use a "corridor approach" that follows the line through various communities.

"It was a good meeting in that we've been given contacts to set up quiet zones for when the ruling comes down," said Griffin, who has been working with residents on the issue. "The quiet zones will allow us to balance safety with residential quality-of-life issues."

Griffin said another option being explored is the use of "wayside horns" mounted on poles at the crossing that are automatically triggered by the train at a certain point, keeping the blowing to the necessary legal minimum.

Residents also asked about establishing consistency on the volume and length of whistles but were told that the quieter horns were probably violating a state law, not the noisier ones.

One sticky issue is liability. Cities would have to assume liability for accidents in the case of quiet zones.

Not everyone in West University Place is against trains and some even find them soothing.

"I believe area residents in West U. and Bellaire are blowing the issue of train whistles way out of proportion," said resident Howard Bingham of the 4100 block of Bellaire Boulevard in an e-mail sent to the Houston Chronicle's ThisWeek section. "I have lived within one block of the rail line going between West U. and Bellaire for most of the years since 1952.

"The steam whistles in the 1950s were much louder than what we hear today," Bingham continued. "These people that are complaining knew of the railroad tracks before they bought their houses. They should learn to live with the noise. If they can't, they ought to move." Residents have said that the traffic on the track has increased in the last few years, which was confirmed by Union Pacific officials who estimated 25 to 30 trains per day run on the line.

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Antweil and Palmer said they have received well over 100 e-mails on citizenfeedback@houston.rr.com from seven neighborhoods along the track and almost all are in favor of silencing the horns.

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